

# CAN YOU READ THIS?

Many workers conceal their problems with literacy and numeracy, and some of them will be your best people. **MIKE STYLES** offers advice to help them.



**W**orkplaces commonly have signs relating to health and safety, but how can you be sure all your people know and understand what the signs say?

It is sad but true that between 30 and 40 percent of the New Zealand workforce have literacy deficits that prevent them from fully engaging in the workplace. At least ten percent have learning differences, like dyslexia, that will limit their ability to read text (some of this group are contained in the group above).

Workers who have English as a second language are likely to have real gaps in their understanding of everyday language, and of technical terms as well.

## HIDING THE PROBLEM

As well as problems with literacy, a significant proportion of the workforce have numeracy deficits that can lead to problems, including in health and safety. Getting a calculation one decimal place wrong can have serious outcomes.

While it is likely you will have people in your workplace struggling with literacy, it is probable that they will be trying hard to hide those issues. An employee with reading and writing issues, for example, is unlikely to fill in a near-miss form

and risk exposing their poor literacy to others.

(It's important to acknowledge that literacy issues are not a sign of low intellect. Some of your most intelligent staff may have literacy problems.)

## LITERACY AND SAFETY

There is little research in New Zealand that links poor reading skills to health and safety problems, but research conducted a decade ago by the Institute for Work and Health in Canada uncovered an alarming trend.

"Young people with dyslexia were 2.7 times more likely to have been injured on the job than those without a learning difference," noted the research paper published in the August 2009 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"People with dyslexia typically do not tell their employer," the Canadian paper goes on to say. "They would rather do their best with their learning disability than ask for help because of the stigma."

It is highly likely that the risk factors created by literacy, numeracy or learning difference issues are similar in New Zealand. The problems are exacerbated by the reluctance of those with literacy issues to admit they are struggling. This

## SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

- Talk about safety at least as much as you have documents about it. Good conversations always trump written safety documents.
- Consider the font used in your H&S documents. Avoid italics and underlining. If you want to stress something, use bold. Always use a minimum 12-point font size. Avoid fonts with serifs. Avoid capitals where possible.
- Consider the background colour. Black text on a white background is difficult for many people. Buff or pastel coloured paper is better (and any light colour is better than white).
- It helps those with limited literacy skills if key documents are presented in bullet point form as opposed to continuous text.
- There are many technological aids to assist staff engage with key documents. A text-to-speech function on a computer can be set up for no cost. It is not expensive to set up a computer with software (or download an app) that enables staff to complete an incident report by dictating as opposed to writing their comments.
- Reporting forms need to be well formatted, with subheadings, to help those with limited literacy skills navigate the format.

creates two ongoing problems. Firstly, the worker is at risk. Secondly, the root cause of the risk – low literacy – is not picked up because the worker is hell-bent on hiding their personal shame.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

It is not the job of health and safety practitioners to teach people to read. However, it is their job to keep people safe. There are some simple and inexpensive things an organisation can do to improve the safety of those staff who struggle with reading

and writing.

For companies with significant literacy and numeracy challenges there is government funding available to address the issue. The Workplace Literacy Fund that sits under the Skills Highway, administered by the Industry Training Federation, is available to address literacy and numeracy issues that affect the workplace. Addressing health and safety issues would be a worthwhile use of this funding.

An examination of the Skills Highway website will reveal that low literacy and numeracy does not need to be a life sentence.

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